



A Study on English Translation of Song Ci From the Perspective of Translation Aesthetics

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Abstract

Song Ci, one of the highest literary achievements in the history of Chinese literature, is of high aesthetic and artistic value, while the study on the translation of Song Ci still has much room for further efforts. Based on the translation aesthetic, a tentative study is made to analyze how the current translation represent the original beauty and what can be refined through example analysis respectively from the perspective of sound, lexis, emotion, and images. The representation of the rhythm, words and feelings is feasible, but due to cultural diversity, the aesthetic value of image is more difficult to reproduce.

Key words: Translation of Song Ci; Translation aesthetics; Aesthetic representation

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INTRODUCTION

With the advance of “Confidence in Chinese Culture”, the tendency and focus of translation has turned from foreign-Chinese direction to Chinese-foreign one, and the translation of Chinese classic has drawn growing attention from translators and scholars. Song Ci, one of the pearls

in Chinese classical literature, irradiates brilliant shine and luster. According to the current literature data, “the rudiment of Ci was formed in the early Tang Dynasty” (Wang, 2005, p.151) and the peak of Ci appeared in the Song Dynasty. Therefore, Ci has been regarded as the most representative literature of the Song Dynasty by later generations, juxtaposed with the Tang poetry. However, the study on translation of Song Ci lags far behind that of Tang Poetry, and the current study on it mainly concentrates on the translation strategies. The melodious rhythm, uneven lines and glorious images are the prominent traits of Song Ci, which endow it with matchless beauty and artistic value. It is reasonable to combine Song Ci translation with translation aesthetics, as the task of the latter is to explore the special significance of aesthetics to translation studies, and analyze, interpret and solve the aesthetic problems in interlingual conversion on the foundation of aesthetics principles (Dang, 2010, p.97). The “marriage” of Song Ci translation and translation aesthetics can not only fill the blank but also provide some enlightenment for scholars in the translation field.

1. TRANSLATION AESTHETICS AND SONG CI TRANSLATION

1.1 Translation Aesthetics

Chinese aesthetics originates from philosophy. Laozi (571BC-471BC), the first one who put forward the concept of beauty, advocated “promoting faith and suppressing beauty”, and held a negative attitude towards the beauty of ostentation. Then his thought was accepted as the principle by later translators. Until the Qing Dynasty, on account of the invasion of western powers, China began to learn western cultural thoughts, thus causing a debate on translation theory. Yan Fu proposed “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” in

his translation of *Evolution and Ethics* published in 1898. After that, Fu Lei successively put forward the theory of “the spirit is more important than the form”, and Qian Zhongshu insisted “transformation”. All these theories that have profound aesthetic origin are of vital significance for formulation of translation aesthetics.

In the early 1980s, Zhu Guangqian, the famous Chinese aesthetic master, has put forward the concept of “translation aesthetics”. And *A Comparative Study of Translation Aesthetics* by Xi Yongji published in 1992 marked the burgeon of translation aesthetics. He affirmed the artistic and aesthetic value of the source language and the target language, and through many a comparative literature example, analyzed how the aesthetic factors of both English and Chinese literary text affect the translator’s selection from the aspects of language, style and artistry. In 1993, Qian Guanlian published *Aesthetics Linguistics: the beautiful: language and speech*, in which he defined aesthetic linguistics and interpreted the aesthetic problems in language and speech theoretically. In the same year, Fu Zhongxuan elaborated the aesthetic subject and object, aesthetic activities and aesthetic standards of translation and other issues in *Practical Translation Aesthetics*, taking a crucial step for the formulation of the theoretical framework of translation aesthetics. In 1995, the publishment of *An Introduction to Translation Aesthetics* in Taiwan marked the establishment of translation aesthetics. The author Liu Miqing not only absorbed the research achievements of predecessors, but also discussed artistic and scientific nature of translation, the aesthetic origin of translation theories, the problems of literary translation, and the aesthetic representation of translation. The book builds a complete and scientific theoretical framework and is a symbol of the maturity of translation aesthetics. In 2005, Mao Ronggui published *Translation Aesthetics*, in which he analyzed the beauty of Chinese and English respectively and the interlingual transformation of fuzzy beauty in the process of translation. Besides, Mao also combined this theory with science and technology translation, further expanding the applicability domain of translation aesthetics theory. Since then, the study on translation aesthetics has been predominantly connected with literature, with proliferating study achievements in the past decade.

1.2 The English Translation of Song Ci

The English translation of Song Ci emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, but the translations were not perfect in quantity and quality until 1986, when Xu Zhongjie’s *100 Chinese Ci Poems in English Verse* made an outstanding contribution to the translation of Song Ci, and in 2001 Nie Jinsen, Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie published *Song Proses*, which has made a supplementary for the translation of Song poetry. It is worth mentioning that Xu Yuanchong, the translation master who has proposed Three-beauty Theory, has translated numerous Chinese

classics, and his *300 Song Lyrics* has won high praises in the translation field. Zhuo Zhenying, who also perseveres in the translation of Song poems, has translated the representatives of Song Ci in *Selected Ci-Poems of The Song Dynasty*. In China, the scholar Wang Ping (2015), who combined Song Ci with translation aesthetics systematically, analyzed the beauty representation of Song Ci from four aspects: image, artistic conception, emotion and style, which marked the further expansion of the application scope of translation aesthetics theory. Domestic translation scholars have turned their attention to the bond of translation aesthetics and Song Ci translation, providing a new perspective for the study of Song Ci translation.

2. AESTHETIC REPRESENTATION IN THE TRANSLATION OF CHINESE SONG LYRICS

Aesthetic representation is the starting point and objective of literature translation. “The main method of aesthetics representation is imitation, whose core is the empathic perception of the source language, including immigration of feeling, dynamic equivalence, and image competence” (Liu, 2005, p.252). Ancient Chinese literati have been exquisite in the creation of sound, the choice of words, the selection of image and the expression of emotion. Song Ci, an integrity of aesthetic elements, is composed of two schools: the Hao Fang school (bold and unconstrained school) and the Wan Yue school (graceful and restrained school), which have totally different styles. Therefore, in the process of translating Song Ci, the translator should not only pay attention to the aesthetic information of formal system (including sound, lexis, syntax and text), but also heed the diverse style of the original works. This tentative study is conducted to analyze how to reproduce the beauty and aesthetic ideals of ancient Chinese in the English translation of Chinese classics from four aspects: beauty in sound, lexis, emotion and image.

2.1 The Beauty of Sound

“Sound is one of the basic forms to convey aesthetic information.” (Liu, 2005, p.70) Song Ci is a kind of music literature, whose musicality is of high aesthetic value. Stemming from two language families, English and Chinese differ from each other in the respect of rhyme. Multiple rhymes are widely adopted in English poetry, that is, in the same poem, several rhymes are changed continuously or several rhymes are used interchangeably, which is on account that most Indo-European words are polysyllabic and there are less homophones than that in Chinese, thus there are often not enough rhyming words in a poem. However, Chinese is basically composed of monosyllables, with dominant vowels and abundant rhymes. Therefore, the same rhyme dominating the whole

poem is feasible, which has become a major feature of Chinese poems and lyrics. Although the rhyme form of Chinese poetry is beautiful, it is difficult to transplant it into English and fully express the sound beauty of the source language.

The original:

苏轼·蝶恋花·春景
花褪残红青杏小。燕子飞时，绿水人家绕。枝上柳
绵吹又少。天涯何处无芳草。
墙里秋千墙外道。墙外行人，墙里佳人笑。笑渐不
闻声渐悄。多情却被无情恼。

The translation:

Xu: Butterflies in Love with Flowers
Red flowers fade, green apricots appear still **small**,
When swallows **pass**
Over blue water that' surrounds the garden **wall**.
Most willow catkins have been blown away, **alas!**
But there is no place where grows no sweet **grass**.

Without the wall there is a path, within a **swing**.
A passer-by
Hears a fair maiden's laughter in the garden **ring**.
The ringing laughter fades to silence by and **by**;
For the **enchantress the enchanted** can only **sigh**.

Analysis: Su Shi, one of the pioneers of powerful and free school, has composed numerous bold and unconstrained Song lyrics, while he also wrote many a graceful and restrained poem and this poem is one of the representatives. This poem sketches out a scene of an encounter between a passerby outside the wall and a lady swinging inside in the early summer, expressing the author's grief over the passing spring. The whole poem is composed of eight sentences, each line ended with the Chinese vowel "ao", which endows the poem with goodness of sound. "This kind of rhyme in Chinese poetry is hard to represent in its English translation, while the sound beauty of the original can be retained through compensatory means." (Liu, 2005, p.73) From the translation, it is obvious that the translator has mobilized his aesthetic perception, artistic imagination and artistic emotion. Xu Yuanchong, the proposer of the translation theory "three beauty", endeavors to convey the beauty of sound through retaining the rhyme as far as possible under the condition that the beauty of artistic conception is not lost. "As far as translating poetry is concerned, faithfulness to meaning is not the only requirement; if the translated poem does not convey the charm of the original rhyme and has no appeal, then it cannot be regarded as a successful translation." (Wang, 1997, p.231) In Xu's translation, each line of the upper and lower stanza is rhymed in the form of "ababb" (for example, /ɔl/ /æs/ /ɔl/ /æs/ /æs/). In English, alliteration is the main method to create the goodness in sound, which can also compensate the aesthetic beauty in translation, taking "enchantress the

enchanted" as an example, the two "enchan" enhanced the rhythm, and the same consonant "gr" in "grows no sweet grass" has equally satisfactory results. Although the English version represents the beauty of rhyme, it sacrifices certain accuracy consequently. Take "Alas" as a case, the original text doesn't express the sense of sigh, but the translator adds the interjection for rhyme. In addition, *Shuang Sheng* (equal to alliteration) is a prominent feature of Chinese. For instance, "秋千" means "swing", which is difficult to represent the alliteration in English. As the retained aesthetic elements surpass what has been lost, Xu's translation has reproduced the beautiful rhythm of the source text and can be said a decent version.

2.2 The Beauty of Lexis

"Another basic unit carrying aesthetic information in language is words, which is the most important basic unit." (Liu, 2005, p.92) Chinese, taking characters as the basic unit, stresses the trinity of "sound, shape and meaning". Especially in ancient poetry, each character is carefully selected, which plays an important role in the combination of sound, meaning and emotion of the whole text. Words bearing aesthetic information accurately express the author's original meaning and precisely suit the context. Ancient Chinese writers of poetry and song constantly carry forward the classical Chinese, leaving many famous lines that are catchy and full of deep feeling. Sometimes, a simple word or two not only makes the whole sentence more rhythmic, but also enables the reader to better understand the emotions between the lines. Chinese classical words are tersely worded, which may be expressed by a phrase or a sentence when a word is converted into English. Sometimes, it will break the rhythm of the overall style of writing, which has a negative effect on the beauty of the original text.

The Original:

如梦令·李清照
昨夜雨疏风骤，浓睡不消残酒。试问卷帘人，却道
海棠依旧。
知否，知否？应是绿肥红瘦。

The translation:

Zhuo: A Dreamy strain
The rain was **light** but the wind **fierce** yestereve;
Wine's effect on me my sound sleep didn't relieve.
I ask about th' begonias **on which I am keen**.
"They're as **nice** as before," says the maid, rolling up
th'screen.
"Do you know?"
"Do you know?"
Retort I, "What's red should be **paler** than what's
green."

Analysis: The above is an immortal masterpiece by Li Qngzhao, a distinguished poetess in Song Dynasty, with its characters, scenes and dialogues fully demonstrating the expressive power of Song Ci and the talent of the

poetess. The description of asking about the condition of the flowers following the rain expresses the poet's cherishment of the flowers and sentimentality towards spring. The whole poem is concise and succinct. Especially the notional words, for example, “疏” and “骤” describe the rain and the wind respectively, which forms a striking contrast and echoes with the poetess' speculation “绿肥红瘦”. The poetess used the rhetorical device metonymy to depict her conjecture of the flowers after the rain: “绿” refers to the leaves and “红” the flowers. Besides, the character “试” indicates that poetess' ambivalence that she can't bear to see the fallen flowers but wants to know the truth. And the adversative conjunction “却” shows the maidservant knowing nothing about the author's mood and her delight on hearing the unexpected answer. The translation of this poem is as concise as the original, but also compensates the information that hidden in the original text. For instance, in the first line, the translator chose “light” and “fierce” to represent the rain and wind, and to highlight the contrast, he also added “but”. As to the second, the object appears at the beginning of the line, which is designed to form the end rhyme of the poem. Zhuo added “on which I am keen” and “nice” when the sentence “试问卷帘人，却道海棠依旧” was translated into English; the adjective clause “on which” manifests the poetess' concern for the flowers, and the adjective “nice” gives rise to the subsequent dialogue and contrasts with “paler”, which makes sense for English readers. The translator represents the beauty of word on the basis of an utter grasp of the original emotion and style.

2.3 The Beauty of Emotion

“The beauty of imagery and artistic conception in Song lyrics contains the profound emotional experience of the poets and conveys a kind of emotional beauty.” (Wang, 2015, p.105) Tang poetry is often passionate, and on the contrary, Song poetry is sentimental. The original works should be thoroughly read at the very start with full feelings for the sake that the poet's emotion contained in the lines of the works can be comprehended by the translator, who should follow the poet's psychological ups and downs from the music and rhythm of the works. Only when the translator feels the emotional beauty of the original, will he be able to produce a translation full of emotion and arouse the emotional resonance of the target language readers.

The original:

八声甘州·柳永
对潇潇暮雨洒江天，
一番洗清秋。
渐霜风凄紧，
关河冷落，残照当楼。
是处红衰翠减，
苒苒物华休。

.....

归思难收。
叹年来踪迹，
何事苦淹留？
想佳人妆楼颙望，
误几回、天际识归舟。
争知我，
倚阑杆处，
正恁凝愁！

The translation:

Zhuo: An Eight-Beat Song of Ganzhou
The evening rains are splattering over the stream,
Washing away autumn that's cool and clear;
The setting sun on th' tower does feebly gleam,
As the wind's **chillier** and th' landscape **drear**.
The red having faded, and wither'd the green
Nature's breaths appear to have ceas'd,

.....

Nostalgia will run **out of control**.

Alas! Whereat should I on strange lands roam?

Over recent years' drifting life I sigh!

How oft has my love on th' tower peer'd far away?

How oft has she taken th' returning sails

On th' horizon for mine? Oh, could she know that I,

Engrossed in a yearning dismay,

Am now leaning against the rails?

Analysis: This poem was written in late autumn, with the upper stanza depicting the landscape and the lower part expressing emotion. The character “对” in the first sentence of the original indicates that the author was facing a scene of autumn rains. Modified by “潇潇” and “洒”，“it seems that the sound of rain is audible and the dynamics of it is visible” (Shen, 2008, p.48). The poet adopted numerous images to create a bleak atmosphere of a clear autumn evening after rain and a desolate sunset, which generated in him a sensation of nostalgia. The initial characters “不忍” is a turning point in both the poet and the emotion. Although he climbed high and gazed far, the hometown was out of sight. Then the writer recalled his experience and asked himself why he lived a drifting life. “In the process of translation, the translator should present himself at the very spot, involve in the very occurrence, witness the very parties concerned, iterate the very utterance, experience the very joy and annoy, share the very weal and woe, and partake the very glee and grief” (Zhang, 1997, pp.200-201). The translator Zhuo is adept at rendering the atmosphere, and in his translation, he adopts two comparative degree words “chillier” and “drear” to indicate that the poet has stayed for a long time and his mood changed with the elapse of time. The aesthetic subject's comprehension of the original emotion is best reflected in the translation of the third line. “Nature's breaths appear to have ceas'd” echoes with the loneliness of the poet. In the lower stanza, the translator also utterly represents the emotion of the original. Zhuo does not translate the sentence “归思难收”

verbatim, with the phrase “out of control” manifesting the strong homesickness. In addition, the interjection “alas” is added to vivify the poet’s sigh. Then the two identical sentence structure “How oft has” enhances the rhythm, which results in a more intensive and eager sensation of returning home. Four interrogative sentences in the lower stanza reinforce the emotion step by step, and with the repetitive falling and rising tone, the emotion sublimates to a more profound stage. In brief, the emotional beauty of the original is completely represented in the English version.

2.4 The Beauty of Image

As a core category of Chinese classical poetics discourse, “image” embodying the beauty of Chinese culture and artistic conception is first formed for its tangible attribute, in that the way to obtain the image is intuitive as it can be seen, touched and felt. Secondly, the ultimate purpose of the formation of image is to express meaning. If an “image” can be directly related to the “meaning” behind it, then the image has been solidified into a metaphor, symbol or even allusion with definite meaning. “For poets, these allusions are no longer direct images, but indirect images generated by imagination” (Liu, 2012, pp.141-143). Chinese culture has a long history, with numerous cultural symbols deposited over thousands of years, so in literary works, “an allusion can evoke many associations and enable the poetry itself produce greater aesthetic effect” (Gu, 2003, p.23).

The original:

破阵子·为陈同甫赋壮语以寄之辛弃疾
醉里挑灯看剑，梦回吹角连营。八百里分麾下炙，
五十弦翻塞外声，沙场秋点兵。
马作的卢飞快，弓如霹雳弦惊。了却君王天下事，
赢得生前身后名。可怜白发生！

The translation:

Xu: Dance of the Cavalry

Though drunk, we lit the lamp to see the glaive;
Sober, we heard the horns from tent to tent.
Under the flags, beef grilled
Was eaten by our warriors brave
And martial airs were played by fifty instruments:
'T was an autumn manoeuvrein the field

On gallant steed,
Running full speed.
We'd shoot with twanging bows
Recovering the lost land for the sovereign
'T is everlasting fame that we would win.
But alas! White hair grows!

Analysis: As a representative of unconstrained Ci school, Xin Qiji devoted all his passion and concerns over the vicissitude of the country into his poetry. The patriotic poet has its own characteristics in the choice of images. In general, traditional images such as the orchid, willow, and beauties seldom appear in his works. Instead

the historical events and figures, which is consistent with the solemn and stirring emotional tone expressed in the poetry, endows his works a unique sensation. In this poem, many images are related to the battlefield. These images bear the imprint of Chinese culture, which gives rise to confusion for non-native speakers, in that once these images are translated into another language, without the same historical background, the same associations cannot be aroused, and it is not easy to convey the meaning and beauty of the original poem. On this issue, Mr. Xu (2006, p.74) advocates making full use of the famous sentences and vocabulary of foreign poets to make the foreign languages serve the Chinese. In the first verse “挑灯” is a behavioral image, referring to the poet’s raising the wick of the oil lamp. While Xu translates it into “lit the lamp”, which is easier to understand for English reader, yet the artistic conception is weaker than the original. In the second sentence, “麾下” means the “troops”, and “麾” the “flags”; Xu retains the image and “under the flags” renders an atmosphere of frontier life. The diverse cultural features of the two languages should be taken into full account in the replacement of images and the cultural background of the target readers should be fully considered. “Images with strong cultural color of the source language should not be literally translated, which will bring confusion to the readers about the cultural background” (Li & Li, 2009, p.61). The image “五十弦” is a traditional Chinese musical instrument [with](#) fifty strings (now twenty five strings), and in the poem it generally refers to many instruments. Xu translates it into “fifty instruments”, which can prompt English readers to map out a solemn and magnificent scene. In the last sentence, “白发” is a common image in Chinese classical poetry to express regret with the lapse of time, and in this poem it indicates that the writer is too old to serve the emperor and recover the lost land. In the English version, the translator uses “white hair” to represent the senility of the poet. In short, the translation is intelligible and concise; the avoidance of cultural strangeness enables western readers to understand the poem, while the beauty of image and the sense of picture are correspondingly cut down.

CONCLUSION

Song Ci, the jewel of Chinese classical literature, exudes incessant charm and beauty, and the translation and publicity of it should draw due heed. This study, from the perspective of translation aesthetics, explores the characteristics of the marriage between aesthetics and translation in the process of translating Song Ci into English by example analysis, which is helpful to the study of English translation of Chinese poetry. Therefore, on the one hand, translators should use aesthetic understanding to focus on the aesthetic performance of poetry translation. On the other hand, translators should actively use the idea

of aesthetics to achieve the transformation of aesthetic quality in order to be the cultural communicator of aesthetic emotion.

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